Barriers and Biases Preventing Women from achieving top Strategic Management Positions

Blerta Agushi

Istanbul University / Management and Organisation

ABSTRACT: *The advancement of women, specifically in strategic management positions in the corporate workplace, has improved in the past decades. However, research conducted in firms across the developed nations indicates that although there are improvements in enabling women to get mid-management positions in companies and organizations, male employees still dominate the executive positions. Corporate governance areas such as executive leadership and directorship have a broader representation of men than women. This revelation goes against the picture painted by the promotion of women in employment positions in companies. It also raises interest in the strategies that are being used in corporate governance in promoting employees, and whether there is gender bias or discrimination that points to this anomaly. This paper examines the reasons that stop women from breaking barriers and biases to attain top strategic management positions. It also highlights steps that have been taken to expand the involvement of women in leadership positions. The paper argues that there are both structural issues in corporate settings and in society that hinders the progress of women to strategic management positions. Other factors that contribute to this situation include the reaction of women through empowerment groups to this situation, discrimination and prejudices, and prevailing perceptions of leadership and gender.*

KEY WORD: *Barriers, bias, discrimination, top strategic management position*

I. INTRODUCTION

The past five decades have seen an improvement in the involvement of women in leadership positions in the corporate world. From the fashion business in the UK to ownership of companies that are categorized under the Fortune 500 companies, several women have managed to have successful carriers both in business and leadership positions in corporate companies (Pingleton et al., 2016). There has also been an increase in the presence of women in mid-management positions as well. However, the rate of involvement of women in management remains inferior to that of men. Most executive positions across the world are male-dominated. Despite this reality, the references made of past cultural gender inequality project the present women's situation as achieving equity, while it does not (Gabaldon et al., 2016). The projections give an idea of gender equity in employment opportunities and access to education compared to the 1960s, where most women were housewives. The ongoing statistical inequality contradicts the perceived equality and reveals that women are still underrepresented in governance positions, executive leadership, and directorship (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017). This paper investigates the barriers and biases that women still face in their quest to attain top strategic management positions.

In March 1984, Nora Frenkiel coined the metaphor 'glass ceiling' to explain the obstacles that women face once they have been promoted to mid-management positions and seek to rise higher to the ultimate decision-making positions such as the directorship or executive manager position (Kisi, 2019). From her metaphor, several women empowerment groups and leaders have used the phrase of shattering the glass ceiling to indicate the breakage of the barriers that inhibit women from strategic management positions. Apart from the 'glass ceiling,' the other common phrase that is used to describe the challenges women face in rising to executive management positions is 'labyrinth' (Gabaldon et al., 2016). The term 'labyrinth' is often used to describe the exhausting and complicated challenges that women who are on their ways to senior roles must navigate. Statistics indicate that of the board members and corporate officers of the Fortune 500 companies, the percentage of women has ranged between 36 percent and 40 percent (Kisi, 2019). Also, in the Fortune 500 companies' CEO list of 2018, only 24 were women (Kisi, 2019). This indicates the disparity that exists between men and women in executive leadership positions of organizations.

Apart from the difficulty of achieving those high positions in the corporate world, women who attain those positions face other burdens as well. The burdens include sexual harassment, isolation, prejudice, tokenism, and stereotyping. From these burdens, it is evident that there are structural issues in corporate settings and society that create barriers for women in their quest to rise to strategic management positions (Pingleton et

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al., 2016). Isolationism and sexual harassment also indicate the presence of prevailing perceptions of leadership and gender. Some of the dominant perceptions are coined in the form of discrimination and prejudice. It does not help that the responses that women provide whenever such barriers exist further complicates the pathway to the quest to attain leadership positions in corporate institutions.

II.   STRUCTURAL ISSUES IN SOCIETY

The structural issues in society are challenges that women face that emanate from public policy and cultural leanings. Cultural leanings come from the expectation that society has on women regarding human capital and participation in service industries like social and community services, education, and health services (Gabaldon et al., 2016). The nature of the social policy that is being implemented perpetuates the inequality that women must face when they desire to pursue leadership positions in the corporate world. One of such inequality is in the exercise of both the paternity and maternity leaves (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017). Most companies tend to ensure that there is maternal leave that is given to women upon the birth of a child. From birth, women are always advised to take the maternal leave, and when they come back, most corporate institutions require that they work part-time for a certain duration. The same provision is not extended to men (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016). The social perception that emerges, which then creates a social barrier for women when they pursue leadership positions, is that they are more required to fulfill family responsibilities' requirements than men.

Despite the increase in the number of women who are in gainful employment, there is still the requirement by the society that they commit to fulfilling family responsibilities as well (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017). This social perception has not shifted to the same degree as the inclusion of women to employment opportunities. The research quoted in Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard's (2010) research revealed that the average woman works double the working hours of men, and this disparity forces women to choose unhealthy work-life when they want to progress in their careers. Top management positions in the corporate world are more demanding as well than the mid-management positions, creating an unimaginable pressure for women who seek those positions to make certain sacrifices (Chisholm-Burns et al., 2017). The sacrifices might go against the expectations that women fulfill certain family responsibilities, leading to burdens such as increased isolationist tendencies in the workplace, stereotypes, and prejudice.

The other barrier that women face is limited human capital. In this context, human capital denotes the knowledge and experience attributes of an employee to the assigned position. The cultural expectations for women are that part of their social responsibility is to care for aging parents, or take care of their children (Diehl & Dzubinski, 2016). A similar degree of expectation, specifically on care, is not placed on men. This leaves men with the opportunity to learn their trade on decision-making in income-generating activities for the family. A similar experience, when nurtured through education, provides enough human capital that then allows men to be better equipped to handle management positions in the corporate world (Brescoll, 2016). Women, on the other hand, must develop their human capital through higher education degrees in respective fields that are required in leadership positions. This bias limits the chances of women to demonstrate their ability to hold and excel in strategic management positions.

III.   STRUCTURAL ISSUES IN CORPORATE SETTINGS

Structural issues in corporate settings are less widespread compared to those of society. However, they directly affect the chances of women to attain leadership positions in organizations. One of the structural issues in the corporate world is the 'old boys' networks (Auster & Prasad, 2016). The male-dominated networks in the corporate world come from the privileges that men have had over women over time, and would still want to maintain the same domination in leadership positions. The homogeneity that emerges from such networks inhibits the chances of women to break into strategic management portfolios (Brescoll, 2016). Women who have managed to break the barrier and hold strategic management positions in companies do not have such elaborate women networks that could facilitate the growth of women in executive positions (Kisi, 2019). Such networks are also affected by other extra commitments at home, which limit the efficiency of any existing women-oriented networks to create an impact.

The other structural issue in the corporate world is some of the underlying issues that are not related to the experience and superior skills of an individual. There are cases of powerful people determining the people that are cleared to hold certain executive positions in organizations (Brescoll, 2016). The ambiguity of these unclear parameters and guidelines that can influence who becomes a leader in a company increases when the applicant is a female. Issues of sexual harassment and indecent sexual approaches would come up as favor demands if a woman wanted to be cleared for such positions. Most women who have managed to reach higher mid-management positions have stronger moral convictions on what they need to allow (Glass & Cook, 2016), and would not lower their dignity to accommodate such immoral practices like sexual favors.

IV.   UNDERLYING PERCEPTIONS OF LEADERSHIP AND GENDER

No research supports the perception that effectiveness in leadership varies across gender. However, the misperception that men are more qualified to lead as opposed to women is prevalent. Leadership qualities are viewed as closely related to male attributes as opposed to women in some organizational cultures, and this perception has largely not been undone (Pingleton et al., 2016). Consequently, women who possess attributes that are closely related to those of the male gender are resisted and stereotyped in organizations (Glass & Cook, 2016). The beliefs that explain this phenomenon of leadership bias across gender can be explained through two sets of beliefs, namely prescriptive belief and descriptive belief.

The prescriptive belief comes from the perception of how a woman or man should act, where men are expected to be courageous while women are required to be gentle. The descriptive belief, on the other hand, is how society expects a woman or a man to act, where men are perceived to be gruff, while women are expected to be chatty (Glass & Cook, 2016). Apart from these belief systems, society prescribes certain attributes to a leader, which largely conforms or resembles male attributes as opposed to female attributes (Pingleton et al., 2016). The perceptions then make the clamor and acceptance of leadership to be male leaning as opposed to female leaning, which negatively affects the pursuit of women to attain top strategic management positions.

V.   UNHEALTHY RESPONSES TO BIAS AND BARRIERS

Some theorists have argued that the nature of the response to calamities or challenges often determines their perpetuation. In the case of bias and barriers to women's pursuit for top positions in strategic management, internalizing the incidents works against women (Matot et al., 2020). Upon facing difficulties, some women would avoid the pursuit of the career progression altogether, or rationalize the barriers through sensemaking. In most cases, the process of sensemaking leads to personal victimization (Glass & Cook, 2016). Most of the women who have managed to reach the top of the management ladder in organizations operate under meritocracy standards, and would often blame themselves for situations that arise as opposed to the identification of external issues that could be the cause (Matot et al., 2020). Consequently, low self-esteem kicks in and minimizes the chances of such women fighting hard to achieve their career goals.

The other way that women responses to barriers and biases perpetuate the continued existence of the barriers is avoiding the career goals that would have higher discrimination or stereotyping rates (Brescoll, 2016). This behavior is largely witnessed in careers that have traditionally been associated with being male-dominated, such as engineering fields. However, the same effect is witnessed when women desire to pursue leadership positions in companies since such portfolios are associated mainly with men. The absence of effort by women to break the barriers and biases emboldens individuals who perpetrate such activities to continue doing so (Matot et al., 2020). This minimizes the chances of women to hold top strategic management positions.

VI.   CONCLUSION

Strategic management positions in the corporate world are mostly held by men. Women form a smaller percentage of that population. Several researches have indicated that there are certain biases and barriers that have pegged down women from attaining such positions. The biases and biases range from discrimination and prejudice, lack of experience, cultural biases, to corporate biases. Some researchers have also acknowledged that the situation is different from what it was several decades ago, with a significant number of women holding mid-level management positions in companies. The increase in education opportunities for women has also contributed to existing of a perception that the state of women in the labor market and participating in decision-making has significantly improved. Despite the existing perception that women have significantly made improvements in reaching top strategic management positions in companies, there is still inequality in their representation when compared to the numbers of men in such positions. The presence of the inequality emerges from barriers and biases that perpetuate the continued alienation of women from those leadership positions. One of the contributors to such preferences is the structural issues in corporate settings and society. The society has created certain biases based on expectations for both the male and female gender. Attributes for leadership are mostly representative of the male gender, while care and gentleness are perceived to be a female's attributes. This creates a feeling that women, unlike men, should not hold leadership positions. Cumulatively, these issues perpetuate the existence of inhibitors that explain the unequal number of women to men in top strategic management positions.

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